

SPRING GARDEN

By James G. Broton

It's easy to overlook Spring Garden. People usually first drive through it by mistake while trying to take a shortcut, and then they find that the road they're on doesn't go straight through because the Miami River or the Seybold Canal gets in the way. And Spring Garden isn't what you usually think of when considering historic neighborhoods in Miami. It's not noted for having blocks of well-groomed, well-maintained houses. Yet it does have fine examples of Mission Revival, Pueblo and Vernacular style homes dating from the late 1910s and early 1920s... and a few surprises. And it has a history to rival that of any other historic neighborhood in Miami.

As a tree-lined residential area near downtown Miami, Spring Garden stands in sharp contrast to the office buildings and businesses around it. It exists as an oasis of greenery surrounded by water and concrete.

The area that would be called Spring Garden can be seen on survey maps from the 1840s. It is known that William English had a mill near the junction of the Miami River and the creek, where he made starch from coontie roots, as the cycad *zamia floridiana* (Florida arrowroot) was called. Fresh water was needed to extract the poison from the mashed roots, and the creek was also located far enough from the river to hide the stench given off by the drying starch. By the 1880s, English's mill was replaced by a steam-powered mill owned by William Wagner, and the creek bears his name.

As the supply of coontie roots dwindled by the turn of the twentieth century, Miami was led by the efforts of Henry Flagler to turn to tourism. Flagler had opened his Royal Palm Hotel at the mouth of the river in 1898 and had golf links built upriver.

Entrepreneur Warren Frazee ("Alligator Joe") took advantage of the situation, opening an attraction catering to Flagler's winter visitors. Frazee's alligator farm on Wagner Creek near the golf link was probably similar to one he had in Palm Beach, where he sold stuffed and live baby alligators and "captured" live adult ones with his bare hands. He alternated appearances at the two attractions, and in a 1911 *Miami Herald* article it was stated that "more visitors see Joe's performances in Florida each winter than go to any other single attraction." Frazee ventured to San Francisco in 1915 to display his saurians at the

Panama-Pacific Exposition there. Not accustomed to the cold March weather, he contracted pneumonia and died.

Around that time, the site of the alligator farm and the land around it were purchased by John Seybold. Seybold had made a name for himself in Miami as a baker, and after what he described as the most successful year of his career, he ventured into real estate. Seybold worked for five years to make Spring Garden a subdivision that would be something special. He widened Wagner Creek and made a turning basin at what is now NW 11th Street. He paved a road leading to it, and built a concrete bridge over the creek, now the Seybold Canal, to get to it. He planted royal palms and made stone benches at a then-divided street called Spring Garden Drive (NW 9th Court). And he installed water, electricity and gas lines throughout Spring Garden before he sold any lots. He was hoping that these improvements, along with the nearness to the Miami River and the golf links just north, would attract the well-to-do to settle in the area. For himself, he built a house and a sales office in Spring Garden on the Seybold Canal Bridge on Seybold Drive (NW 7th Street Rd.).

A major source of publicity for the as-yet-unopened subdivision came with the shooting of scenes of a Fox film in January, 1919. Silent film actor William Farnum starred in "The Lucky Charm" (later released as "The Jungle Trail"). For the shooting, a Hindu Village set was constructed on the canal at NW 8th Street Road. This included a Hindu Temple set at the turning basin of the Seybold Canal. During filming, Seybold invited onlookers to witness "this rare and interesting performance... Before leaving the grounds, we would be pleased to have you drive through the various avenues of Spring Garden and view the building sites... The opening of this high class residential section will take place in the future."

After the film crew left and the set was struck, Seybold opened the subdivision with much fanfare on Wednesday, February 5, 1919 with a public auction of 20 lots and a raffle for \$100 in gold. He also had a permanent residence built in the style of the Hindu Temple. He commissioned well-known Miami architect August Geiger to design it, and it was shown under construction in early advertisements for Spring Garden. When finished, the house was sold to the owner of Musa Isle fruit grove, an attraction upriver. Like the film set, this residence is still known as the Hindu Temple.

For a few years, it seemed like the promise in early advertisements for "Miami's newest high-class subdivision" was beginning to come true. Spring Garden was attracting doctors, lawyers, and businessmen to settle among its

shady oak and mahogany trees. In 1924, Seybold felt confident enough in his investment to expand Spring Garden westward to include more land on the Miami River and land which was within walking distance of the newly-opened Miami Country Club. Again, this "Country Club Addition" attracted several businessmen and professionals to Spring Garden. Then the hurricane came in 1926, and that was followed by the Great Depression. People who had purchased lots in Spring Garden were unable to build, and people with houses already built struggled to survive, or left.

Spring Garden was rediscovered when the Miami area was used to train soldiers during World War II. Distinctively-designed houses sprung up, especially along Seybold Canal and in the Country Club Addition, reflecting post-war optimism with whimsical and creative designs. Residents raised families here, some sending their children to Highland Park Elementary School over the Seybold Bridge (affectionately called the Humpback Bridge). They found Spring Garden to be centrally located near their work.

Now in its 80th year of existence as a subdivision, generations of resident "river rats" have reveled in the unique atmosphere of Spring Garden and have contributed to it. However, through the years there have been threats to its character, if not its very existence. As early as 1924, a petition was circulated to turn NW 7th Street into a four-lane, sixty-foot road with a bridge crossing the Miami River. That idea was rejected in favor of a bridge over NW 5th Street. Most recently, in the 1990s, plans were drawn for an east-west extension of the Metrorail which would have run through Spring Garden. That plan was defeated, due in large part to neighborhood activism in Overtown and Spring Garden.

Since 1997, Spring Garden has been a City of Miami Historic Neighborhood. This was due in large part to the effort of Spring Garden resident Dr. Ernest Martin and an active Spring Garden Civic Association. Martin first approached the residents with the idea of historic designation in 1986. But it took the intrusion of high-rise development on the edge of Spring Garden in 1996 to spur the neighborhood to action. Now when such a development is proposed it must first be approved by the City of Miami Historic Preservation Board.

The status of historic district designation has assisted neighborhood efforts to beautify and preserve the riverfront, Spring Garden's most threatened asset. Working with the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County, the first result of that effort has been the recently opened Greenfield Garden, a heavily landscaped public area with beaches, a birdbath and a path to the river. Miami-Dade County and state efforts have also secured land on the Miami River at the site of Alligator

Joe's attraction, to be used as a park and educational center. A State of Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation grant has also been given to the Spring Garden Civic Association to create a walking tour brochure of Spring Garden. And Spring Garden has figured into plans for a new bridge at NW12th Avenue, slated for construction in 2003. Finally, incorporating all these efforts, Dr. Martin, Brenda Marshall and the Trust for Public Land are working to create a greenway along the Miami River, including an area running along NW North River Drive, through Spring Garden. Spring Garden is using its history to build its future.

Dr. James G. Broton is a clinical neurophysiologist at The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, located near Jackson Hospital. He has lived in the Spring Garden neighborhood for almost five years and is active in its Civic Association. His hobby is the study of Spring Garden and its surrounding area, and he has written the text for a walking tour brochure of Spring Garden. He believes that "if people who work in the Civic Center knew how nice it is to live so close to work, they'd see the benefit of living here. And they would have great old houses to live in."

1. “The Hindu Temple” house in Spring Garden is so named as its design was inspired by a Hindu Village movie set for “The Jungle Trail,” which was filmed in Spring Garden in 1919. Developer John Seybold commissioned architect August Geiger to design the house as an advertisement for Spring Garden. It is now undergoing restoration by its current owner, Krassi Ivanov. (Photo by Becky Roper Matkov)
2. John Seybold widened Wagner Creek, a tributary of the Miami River, turning it into the Seybold Canal for his Spring Garden development. (Photo by Thorn Grafton)
3. A resident leads visitors on a house tour of Spring Garden for Dade Heritage Days’ RiverDay. (Photo by Becky Roper Matkov)

